Israel Could Lose

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Audio Brief

A short, spoken-word summary from CSIS's Jon B. Alterman on his commentary, "Israel Could Lose".

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Israel's army has a remarkable record of winning. It won conventional wars in 1948, 1967, and 1973; it forced the Palestine Liberation Organization to give up armed struggle in 1996; and it has deterred Hezbollah since a 2006 campaign laid waste to the group. The military is strong not merely because of U.S. support, but also because everything about Israeli military–from its doctrine,

organization, and training to its leadership and personnel—makes it by far the most formidable fighting force in the Middle East.

Most discussions about the war in Gaza assume that, in the end, Israel will win. The stakes are so high for Israel, and Israel's edge over Hamas is so large, that any outcome other than victory is unthinkable. The only questions are in what timeframe and at what cost.

And yet it is quite possible that the war in Gaza will be the first war in Israel's history that the army has fought and lost. That loss would be catastrophic for Israel and deeply damaging to the United States. Precisely because of that, it must be considered.

Israel's military has largely avoided the checkered history that has afflicted the United States since the Vietnam War began, after which a record of muddled outcomes began. The U.S. military ended engagements in Lebanon, Somalia, Haiti without clear victories, but they were of a small scale. The post-9/11 wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Syrian-Iraqi border area were serious efforts with serious resources behind them, but years of fighting, billions of dollars, and thousands of U.S. deaths failed to secure victory.

Israelis sometimes argue that there is no comparison between their wars of survival, literally fought on their borders, with far-flung U.S. actions. They argue, too, that the public in Israel is united on matters of survival, while Western populations are fickle in comparison. Israel will win because it must, they say. But what if the lesson that the United States offers is that even weak parties can repel strong ones with the right strategy?

The barbarousness of Hamas's massacres in Israel have drawn comparisons to the Islamic State and al Qaeda, but that can distract from what is really important: that Hamas's concept of military victory, like those other organizations, is all about driving long-term political outcomes. Hamas sees victory not in one year or five, but from engaging with decades of struggle that increase Palestinian solidarity and increase Israel's isolation. In this scenario, Hamas rallies a besieged population in Gaza around it in anger and helps collapse the Palestinian Authority government by ensuring Palestinians see it even more as a feckless adjunct to Israeli military authority. Meanwhile, Arab

states move strongly away from normalization, the Global South aligns strongly with the Palestinian cause, Europe recoils at the Israeli army's excesses, and an American debate erupts over Israel, destroying the bipartisan support Israel has enjoyed here since the early 1970s. Rumblings of a regional war suit Hamas well, prompting global debates about the cost of an alliance with Israel. Israel's ability to sustain its own solidarity through this process is not Hamas' main concern. Rather, its goal is to estrange Israel from its international partners and turn it into the pariah that Hamas believes it to be.

Hamas need not be strong to follow this strategy; it merely needs to be steadfast. Rather than relying on enough strength to defeat Israel, it seeks instead to use Israel's far greater strength to defeat Israel. Israel's strength allows the country to kill Palestinian civilians, destroy Palestinian infrastructure, and defy global calls for restraint. All those things advance Hamas's war aims.

Hamas plans on losing a slew of battles along the way, as it has before. But the group's improbable successes of October 7 will inspire future generations of Palestinians who cherish even small victories against impossible odds. While Hamas seeks to reclaim Jerusalem, that goal is akin to Jewish views of the coming of the messiah and Christian views of the Second Coming. The obligation to work toward it is irrespective of the likelihood of seeing it in one's lifetime.

Israel is betting that it can kill enough Hamas fighters fast enough to win, and it will sort out the details afterward. Hamas's goal is steadfastly clinging to stalemate. What should Israel do to ensure that Hamas is defeated?

Two related things are paramount, and neither is wholly military. The first is to win back global support, which Israel has seemingly surrendered to a corrupt and violent terrorist organization that seeks to slaughter innocents. This is most important in surrounding states, most of which share Israel's hostility to Hamas. When Israel gets to the point of seeking withdrawal from Gaza—and despite recent claims it will not seek withdrawal, it will still need to—it will require the cooperation of countries like Egypt and Jordan and Saudi Arabia to guide the rebuilding of the area. These countries will need to support the influx of supplies, provide some police protection, fund reconstruction, and make legitimate whatever governance structure emerges.

Israel will also need to help invigorate the Palestinian Authority, which has been crumbling for years. While none of these countries are deeply committed to the Palestinian cause, all of them have been offended by what they see as Israeli indifference to Arab lives. They will be unwilling to come in on the back of Israeli tanks, and feel little responsibility to protect Israel from its own actions. They are not eager to take responsibility for Gaza, but they can advance some of their own interests in Gaza and preclude threats to them from taking root there. Israel should be engaging with these governments directly now. It needs to ensure they feel heard, begin convincing them that a stable Gaza is possible if they have a role in it, and to persuade them that a stable Gaza would serve their interests.

The second part, which is related, is that Israel needs to split Hamas off from the population surrounding it, and to ensure that whatever Palestinian solidarity emerges from this war centers around a strong alternative to Hamas. Israeli targeting practices play a role here, but realistically, that alternative organization or movement will need credibly to advance Palestinian aspirations for both prosperity and self-determination. If a large number of Palestinians feel that the only future they face is misery, some large fraction of them will seek to immiserate their afflicters, too. A shared project, a sense of dignity, and a sense of agency goes a long way in motivating vulnerable populations, and if violent armed groups provide the only avenue to pursue those things, those groups will enjoy uncontested primacy in Palestinian life.

Israel would be far better served by a strong Palestinian movement, and one that is at times able to stand up to Israel, not merely surrender to it. The Palestinian Authority under Mahmoud Abbas has failed in this regard, and as a result Abbas's approval ratings barely break single digits. Former Shin Bet chief Ami Ayalon has argued that Palestinians need a political horizon, but it is broader than that. Palestinian misery has many forms—and Palestinians share responsibility for it—but they must feel it can end.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken just spent most of the week in the Middle East pushing these ideas and others, but he didn't seem to have much success. Israel appears very much to be in warfighting mode. If its public statements are any indication, it has not given nearly enough thought to what winning would look like, and Blinken was unable to shift its sights.

Hamas reportedly planned its October 7 action for years, unsure of its own success but reasonably sure of Israel's response. Israel cannot afford to lose a war. But in its efforts to win, it could.

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